

The Man and the Woman and the Edison Phonograph: Race, History and Technology Through Song

BRUCE WATSON, Songwriter
Victoria



Fig. 1 Fanny Cochrane Smith and Horace Watson
Source: Personal collection, Bruce Watson

As a child I was fascinated by this photograph. The elderly, dignified Aboriginal woman singing into a large brass horn attached to an Edison phonograph, while a distinguished gentleman dusts the loose wax off the cylinder with a fine brush. The photo was taken on 10 October 1903 at Barton Hall in Sandy Bay, a suburb of Hobart, Tasmania. The woman is Fanny Cochrane Smith. The man is Horace Watson.

But it wasn't until, as an adult, I saw the photo in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery that I realised just how extraordinary it is. Tasmania's and Australia's history reverberate through it. It is the story of cultural contact, genocide and reconciliation, of tradition and modernity. And it is the act of folklore collection at its most poignant. This is the story of these two people, their lives and their legacies. It is also the story of the legacy of the event depicted in the photograph and its meanings beyond these two people.

The woman in the photo is Fanny Cochrane, born in Wybalenna on Flinders Island in early December 1834. The Aboriginal settlement (originally 'Pea Jacket Point') was renamed Wybalenna, meaning 'Black Man's houses' (Plomley 65), and by 1834 there was an indigenous population of 'about one hundred and thirty men, women and children' (Plomley 75). Most were there as a result of European efforts led by George Augustus Robinson to rid the Tasmanian mainland of its original inhabitants. Fanny's mother Tanganutura, known as Sarah, formed a life-long relationship with Nicermenic, whom she met there. Fanny Cochrane was the first child born at the Wybalenna settlement, and that put her in a unique position. As a youngster she learnt songs, stories and culture from the different language groups across Tasmania. But of course her life was not easy. She was taken from her family at an early age to live in various homes and institutions. These included the Queen's Orphan School in Hobart, where children were sent to learn domestic service skills and were subjected to prison-like discipline.

By the age of 12 she had returned to Flinders Island and was working in virtual slavery as a maid in the Flinders Island home of the catechist Robert Clark, whose wife is said to have given Fanny her surname, Cochrane after her own maiden name (*Maitland*

Mercury 1882). Clark treated her with appalling neglect and brutality. She attempted to burn down his home (Flanagan 256; Postscript 4; Felton 9 [see *Editor's note*]).¹ An official investigation into allegations of cruelty by Clark to children in his care (another of whom was Mathinna, a young Aboriginal girl adopted by Lady Jane Franklin, the wife of Tasmanian Governor and explorer, Sir John Franklin), found he had 'on several occasions chained and flogged Fanny Cochrane' (Flanagan 256; Postscript 4; Felton 9 [see *Editor's note*]).²

The settlement of Wybalenna was a forlorn place. The displaced Tasmanians would stare across the water to their home. They died at an alarming rate. They died because their connection to country had been severed, and from pneumonia and other diseases incubated in their cold, damp, dark stone cottages – not unlike prison cells (Thomas *Black Man's Houses* [see *Editor's note*]).³ By the time Fanny Cochrane reached her early teens the population at Wybalenna had plummeted to less than 50. In 1847, those who survived were moved to Oyster Cove, 30 kilometres south of Hobart. These included Truganini, Tanganutura, Nicermenic and Fanny. On 27 October 1854 Fanny married William Smith, an English sawyer and ex-convict transported for stealing a



donkey (Clark 642). For many years they ran a boarding house in Hobart, before moving to Nicholls Rivulet near Oyster Cove, where she was granted 100 acres. Fanny raised their six boys and five girls in a simple wooden house. The family grew their own produce but their income came from timber; Fanny worked in the bush splitting shingles and carried them out herself. She would walk 50 km to Hobart for supplies.

Fig. 2 Fanny and William Smith with two of their sons (William on left, Frederick on right) Source: Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office

As a convert to Methodism, she hosted church services in her kitchen until she donated some of her land for the building of a church, an act of generosity that constituted a rare case of an Aboriginal person giving land to whites, rather than having it expropriated. One of their sons became a lay preacher and Fanny was active in fund-raising and hosted the annual Methodist picnic. She was known for her generosity and culinary skills, with people travelling long distances to sample her cooking.

Through all of this, Fanny Cochrane Smith kept close ties with her people, including Truganini, who taught her bushcraft and with whom she would fish, hunt and collect bush tucker and medicinal herbs. She also adorned her Edwardian dresses with traditional accessories – shell necklaces, feathers and animal furs. Likewise, she reconciled her traditional spirituality with Christianity and was a bridge between two cultures. Reconciliation personified. When Truganini died in 1876, Fanny Cochrane Smith claimed to be the last Tasmanian.



Fig. 3 Fanny wearing shell necklace and belt with furs. Source: Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office

This set off spurious pseudo-scientific attempts to establish if this was really the case or whether she was, in the language of the day, a half-caste (Barnard 451-454; Roth 60-64). Scientists took samples of her hair, examined photographs and took facial measurements. The community was bitterly divided. Contemporary witnesses, Fanny's own testimony and her parents' claims all concur that her father was indeed Nicermenic and not a white sealer. The Australian Dictionary of Biography lists her father as 'unknown'. (Clark 642)

In popular consciousness Truganini was, and still is, known as the last Tasmanian. Her passing was announced as 'the death of the last Tasmanian'. The books could be closed on this shameful episode in our history. Fanny Cochrane Smith's resolute claims about her racial identity undermined this reassuring assumption. Parliament recognised her claim in 1882 and the government granted Fanny a life pension of £50, and full title to 300 acres, perhaps through a sense of guilt. Despite this, with Truganini gone, for most white Tasmanians, the Aboriginal 'problem' was no longer an issue. Historians and Tasmanian society have chosen to be blind regarding Fanny Cochrane Smith's status.

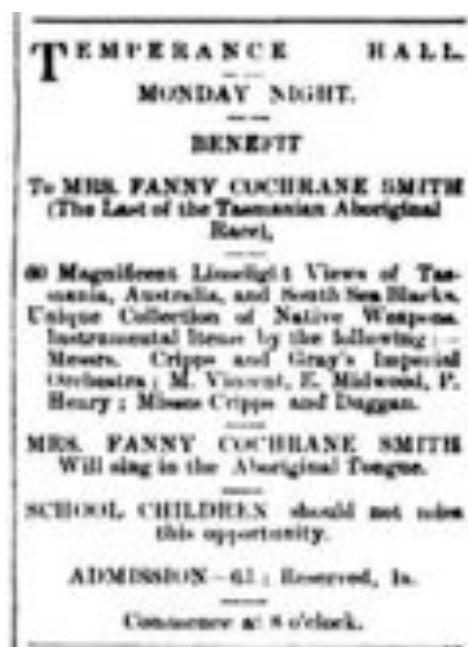


Fig. 4 Advertisement for Fanny Cochrane Smith performance
The Mercury (Hobart) Saturday 28 October 1899

At that time Europeans conceived of Aboriginality differently from today, where we understand aboriginality to reside in identity and community acceptance – and not just DNA. That thinking was behind the concept of 'breeding out' Aboriginality, and was the underlying rationale for the Stolen Generations. Over 10,000 Tasmanians identify as Aboriginal today. In her later years Fanny was conscious that she was the last person on earth who knew the language, songs and stories of her people. This is a situation that has played itself out across Australia in the decades since. Fanny Cochrane Smith's reaction was to share her culture by giving recitals of traditional songs, stories and dance across the state (Clark 642).

Fig. 5 Horace Watson at Keen family wedding
c1897 Source: Collection of Bruce Watson

The man in the photo is Horace Watson. He was born in Bendigo in 1862. His father was a builder who migrated from Leicestershire to Adelaide in 1852, his mother was from Sussex. He became a pharmacist, and married Louisa Keen, daughter of the man who invented Keens Curry Powder in Kingston near Hobart in the 1860s (no connection with Keens Mustard of London) (Davies 212). Louisa had been briefly married to a wealthy, older man. They shared her inherited mansion 'Barton Hall' in Sandy Bay. A life more different from that of Wybalenna can hardly be imagined.



Watson took over the curry-powder business. He was quite the entrepreneur. One of his marketing strategies was to purchase land in the foothills of Mount Wellington overlooking Hobart and transform it into a huge advertising sign. He collected rocks, arranged and painted them white to form the words 'Keens Curry' in 15 meter high letters (Davies 212). It certainly generated controversy, with threats of injunctions by those who felt it defaced their city. The question was even hotly debated in Parliament. Watson defended his right to advertise on his own property – and won (Edwards 36-38). The sign is still there – periodically rearranged to comment on the politics of the day ('Fred's Folly', 'No Dams', 'Gunns Lie'). In another unusual marketing strategy, Horace once organised for some curry to be placed on a ship bound for Antarctica so he could claim that Keens Curry was the first curry in the Antarctic!



Fig. 6. Early photo of Keens Curry sign
Source: *The Mercury* 5,6 (nd)

After years of hard work, he found time to devote to broader interests. He was the first person in Tasmania to extract eggs from a platypus. He established a girls' prize for science at Collegiate School. He travelled widely, and amassed an impressive collection of Aboriginal and Islander artifacts (Watson). One evening in 1899, he attended one of Fanny Cochrane Smith's concerts. He was so impressed, and conscious of the historical moment, that he decided to

make phonograph recordings of the songs. There were two recording sessions, the first of which was made in the rooms of the Royal Society of Tasmania in 1899, followed by sessions in 1903 at Barton Hall, where the photo was taken. This was cutting-edge technology. Horace Watson was one of the first people ever to use recording equipment for documentary purposes, pre-dating even the trailblazing composer and musicologist, Percy Grainger (de Val 341-66). The wax cylinders of the phonograph were cut by a needle attached directly to the brass horn that received the sound. Despite the scratchiness of the recordings, translations of the words have been made, and the language preserved in them has been a major resource used in the reconstruction of a Tasmanian language called palawa kani.⁴ Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have studied the melodic structure of the songs in an effort to understand Tasmanian pre-history, and its links to mainland cultures (Moyle 5,6; Longman 79; Stubington 222-227).

Now, if you visit the Tasmanian Museum in Hobart, you will see a beautifully revitalised exhibit illustrating traditional Tasmanian culture, craft and history. Among the displays is a photo of the recording session, and a push button (actually an Edison cylinder) which replays some of the recordings. It reveals Fanny's high-pitched, rhythmic singing. On one of the recordings she introduces herself and says hauntingly, 'I'm Fanny Smith. I was born on Flinders Island. I am the last of the Tasmanians'.

Audio link, Fanny Cochran Smith Recording [VIEW ITEM](#)

As historian Martin Thomas observes:

The racial ‘purity’ or otherwise of Fanny Cochrane Smith is irrelevant when you hear her voice. Its long endurance makes a point about culture, since it demonstrates that language, song and tradition have a fluidity and yet a resilience that belie the fantasy that genealogy is only a matter of blood (Thomas 105).

Despite the poignancy and historical importance of the recordings, there are strong signs that the recording session itself was fun. In 1909 H. B. Ritz wrote of Fanny Cochrane Smith and Horace Watson that, ‘on one occasion she was delighted to please him by singing two native songs with a phonograph’. And Watson himself says on one of the cylinder recordings, ‘This record was made for me by Fanny Smith in 1903. We had a real excellent time here’ (Ritz 73-83). Fanny Cochrane Smith died in 1905, two years after the recordings were made. Her funeral cortège was followed by more than 400 people (Clark 642). She was buried secretly to avoid the desecration that happened to so many of her people.⁵ Her children’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren make up a large proportion of the current Tasmanian Aboriginal population. The church built on her land at Nicholls Rivulet is now a museum in her honour. Horace Watson died in 1930. The recipe for Keens Curry Powder, which had been passed down secretly for three generations, was sold in 1954 to Reckitt and Colman Australia Ltd., which had long been the manufacturers of a different product, Keens Mustard (Davies 212). They did not like Keens Curry being owned by an independent company. The stately mansion, Barton Hall, is gone. On the site there now stands a McDonalds.

A Century Later: the story of two more people

Horace Watson was my great-grandfather. The photograph I used to take out of the shoe box and look at as a child was taken on the same day as the one in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, but it is a different photo. My father had early memories of meeting Horace Watson at Barton Hall. As a songwriter, I wanted to tell the story in song of these two people and what their lives and the historical moment represented in the photo might mean to us. And I wanted to capture the way music can bridge the gulf between people and cultures and across time.

I wrote the song ‘The Man and the Woman and the Edison Phonograph’ in 1999 and included it on the album *Out My Window*. Some years later while performing at the National Folk Festival in Canberra I was told to look out for a musician named Ronnie Summers from Cape Barren Island, playing in a band called The Island Coes. His great-great-great-grandmother was Fanny Cochrane Smith. It would be a cliché to say ‘the rest is history’. In fact, the rest is history repeating itself with a double twist and pike. We met that weekend and have become firm friends. It was as if we had 100 years of catching up to do.



Fig. 7. Ronnie Summers and Bruce Watson

In 2005 at another National Folk Festival we adapted the words of the song to sing as a duet and performed it at the final concert before an audience of 4,000 people. As we sang the final words of the song, revealing our relationships to Fanny and Horace, the gasps from the audience were audible.

Ronnie says:

It was the most overwhelming thing I've ever done in me life, when I sang the song with Bruce Watson. I'll never go through something like that again, I don't reckon. And everybody heard it in my voice. And when I looked up, we was playing to about thousands of people and I reckon half of 'em was cryin' and that made me worse . . . It was very emotional that last night on stage before all them people . . . there was a special feeling, like a bonding, among all those people. (Summers and Gee 135)

The ovation and the emotional catharsis just powered over us. This reaction was repeated at the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment and Culture — Australia and New Zealand's conference in Launceston, in October 2010. One of my children has said that Ronnie and I are related by song. That phrase goes some way to capturing the magic of the two of us coming together around music, singing about our forebears doing the same thing over 100 years before. The circle of history was completed when we recorded the song together.

Audio File. Live performance of 'The Man and the Woman and the Edison Phonograph', YouTube [VIEW ITEM](#)

¹ Fanny's career as an arsonist is in contention. Flanagan's novel *Wanting* (2008) is a work of fiction and he warns, in his Author's Note, that it should not be read as history (255). He does, however, claim that Fanny Cochrane Smith attempted to burn down the Catechist's house (256). Felton has also written that Fanny tried to burn down the Clark's house (1984 9). George Augustus Robinson attributes the cause elsewhere. In the two fires at Robert Clark's house, the first, on 18 October 1836, 'was discovered in the room where the native boys slept' (Plomley 654). The second, on 9 December 1836, is also attributed to the boys by Robinson: 'my opinion is that it was set on fire by the native boys, and if not intentionally must have been gross carelessness by throwing on of brushwood which causing a blaze soon ignited the roof' (399).

² Caution should be exercised regarding the source of the statement, Flanagan's novel. Flanagan does however provide an online 'Postscript' for readers interested in the 'historical truth behind some of the characters' (4). What is certain, are the number of accusations of cruelty to Aboriginal children levied against Robert Clark (Plomley 97), from the surgeon James Allen (who was also at Wybalenna) (647), Robinson's journals (456-457), and from an early attempt to have Clark dismissed (111).

³ The majority of deaths recorded were among the 'late arrivals' of 1833 and 1834. Contemporaneous accounts state: 'It seems that they died of introduced disease, usually pulmonary complaints against which they had little or no natural immunity – the eastern people at the settlement had acquired some immunity as a result of their longer contact with Europeans. Deaths occurred among Robinson's new captives not only on Flinders Island but also before they reached there' (Plomley 75). This view is supported by Roe (1997), but Watson urges caution regarding 'whose voice you hear in historical accounts'.

⁴ This work was created under the auspices of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc., which produced *Pakana Luwana Liyini* 2005 (CD). An article on the palawa kani Language Program can be found on the website of the Federation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Languages & Culture (Corporation): <http://www.fatsilc.org.au/> A video of Dewayne Everettsmith singing a song written by women from the Tasmanian Aboriginal community celebrating connection to Country and sung in palawa kani can be seen at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

⁵ For example, Truganini's remains were seized from her grave. While the body-snatchers were never identified her skeleton ended up with the Royal Society of Tasmania, the very organisation that later commissioned the recordings.

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